



David Clarkson: Artistic Director

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David Clarkson is the artistic director of Stalker Theatre originally founded in 1985 in New Zealand with Rob McClaren and Bruce Naylor and re-established in Sydney in 1988 with Emily McCormick and Rachael Swain¹. David has been directing and performing with the company for the duration of its existence. His roles include devising new events from the ground up, planning the production models, raising finance, working on storylines and building the collaborative artistic teams for each show, a process that involves developing a distinctive artistic approach to practice. This work extends to solo performances, professional ensemble work, large and small-scale community outreach projects and Olympic Opening Ceremonies. He was Artist in Residence at the Miami Performing Arts Centre, has been awarded the Rex Cramphorn Scholarship for Theatre, and recently has undertaken a number of intercultural exchanges including artistic exchanges in Bogotá, Boulder and Seoul. David was recently awarded the inaugural Arts NSW Art and Technology Fellowship for his research into the use of interactive and digital technology in theatre. His investigations into how to incorporate physical theatre with interactive technologies led him to collaborate with the Creativity and Cognition Studios at University of Technology, Sydney in 2011. In collaboration with Andrew Johnson and Andrew Bluff, the works: Encoded (2012), Pixel Mountain, (Korea 2013) Phosphori (2013), Creature: Dot and the Kangaroo, Creature the Installation (2016) and Frameshift, (Korea 2016) represent innovative developments that deploy digital technology in varied roles from tool to partner.

David is a prime mover who inspires and teaches at the same time as introducing challenging interventions into the field of theatre practice. Nowadays this take place through investigations into how complex interactive technologies can be used to extend the range of human experiences both as performers and audience participants. The technology is a way of enabling the performers to expand the scope and quality of their practice. However, his express approach resists the kind of domination of the human element that introducing new forms of technology can often bring. The impact of partnering so closely with technological tools is he acknowledges still unknown and it will take time and research to understand more clearly what has been achieved for good or ill. His roles include building collaborative teams, a process that involves developing a distinctive artistic approach to practice. The success of the collaboration between Stalker theatre and digital practitioner researchers, Andrew Johnston and Andrew Bluff, rests upon having personal qualities that embrace empathy and awareness of the cultural and language of their respective practices.



Creature: Dot and the Kangaroo

In his interview to follow, David discusses his role in facilitating and guiding his teams through different kinds of performances and events.

Q: Before you were the director of the company were you a performer yourself?

D: I was a director and a performer simultaneously. I have embraced both roles. I was the founding member of Stalker theatre way back in 1985. Back then I was a performer and artistic director. For many years we ran a model where we would conceive works and then invite directors in to direct us. For many years initially, there was a core team of artists, more like an ensemble. In that way, there were multiple directors. We would invite directors in to direct shows but we would conceive those shows. Then the company morphed into a two-artistic director model for many years. Each block was about a ten-year block. That was two artistic directors running two separate strands of Stalker. And then more recently, I'm the sole artistic director of the company.

Q: In terms of your role, what does it entail?

D: Conceiving shows from the ground up, planning the production models for those shows, helping raise the finance that makes those shows possible, building the artistic team, working on storylines with the team. I think one of the main things I do is build teams. I build artistic teams but I also build artistic practice and approach to practice. One of the main approaches that Stalker uses - in theatre terms you talk about 'devising' - and to devise a work it's very much a collaborative effort from the team. There is an initial template, or a sketch or a thought that is continually refined by a group of artists as we work towards the final vision.

One of the things that sets me apart from some directors at least, is I'm very familiar with producing and production logistics. In theatre, there's an awful lot of nuts and bolts to make it happen both financially and logistics, show logistics. I've been in the business so long I pretty much know a lot of those parameters. I work very closely with my team and can supervise all those factors because I've done all those factors myself. I have been very hands on running a company. Perhaps where your particular interest comes in, for the past several years, my repertoire as an artistic director has stepped into the world of technology. Historically we often used devices, machines, technical items, but very Luddite versions! But in the last several years we've stepped into using highly complex interactive technology towards building our shows.

Q: Thinking about the collaboration is there a particular kind of pattern in your operation that seems to manifest or that you encourage?

D: I think that relates to what I was saying about the devising process really. But to be clear I build each team and each relationship to each project. What tends to happen- there's usually a several-year cycle, maybe it's as big as a ten-year cycle, where there is a group of artists I work with, that gradually people come and go, but there is a semi-core team that exists usually for several shows.

Q: And how big is that team?

D: It really varies. With the *Creature* installation, there was a team of about twenty; with *Frameshift*, there was probably around 25 to 30. With some of my smaller shows maybe there's a team of ten. It really varies from project to project.

Q: Does the size of the team change the pattern of collaboration?

D: I think part of the flexibility is being able to operate in a number of ways depending on the situation- situation ethics maybe, or situation's practice. Something both Andrews and I were commenting on is, at the moment as we move into this technology work and as we build our aesthetic, and our complexity, the teams necessarily become larger. So, at the moment, in regards to the shows we're making, we are in a period of expansion. And I've been in periods of expansion before: periods of expansion come to an end and you usually go through a period of contraction so you may have a vision to make a very large work like my next work *Big Skies*, which could have a team of probably 40 or so artists but then the show after that, in theory, could be a contraction where we go OK let's refine an aesthetic, let's scale down, let's achieve the goals we need to achieve. So, with each show often we rely on consolidated artistic platforms and we are also developing artistic platforms or artistic expression. So, you can't make a show that is totally new from scratch, you always use some existing components but what those components are changes for each work.

Q: I'd read that some of the people involved describe it as like being part of a family. Do you agree with that? And what does that mean in reality?

D: The family feel comes and goes. I think that's a little bit to do with my willingness to run teams, my usual warmth on the floor, my inclusiveness...I think the best artistic results can come out of artists if you give them the space to be the best they are and to draw forth their own creativity. If I'm saying to someone 'I want it done

like this', you've got no choice in the matter, it's my vision not yours, that's a one-way conversation which may be very good in a commercial pipeline because it's efficient, but it doesn't necessarily lead to innovation and satisfaction in the team.

Q: If you don't impose your vision, is there nevertheless a unity of purpose and aesthetic?

D: Yes. It's a moot point around imposition. Some people might feel imposed upon but I can make decisions, I will ask people's opinions but at the end of the day if it's 'Is it 'A' or is it 'B'? I will decide, let's run with that because it's my job. But then sometimes other people might feel they are the final arbiter. I try and keep an empowered team and that possibly leads to the family feeling. Families can be awfully inefficient and there's arguments and dis-function as well.

Q: Does that happen?

D: Oh, always! We are all human. One of the things I'm good at – I've done a lot of conflict resolution and the golden rule is if you smell something's going wrong, you talk to it, you don't pretend it's not there. If there's tension between people, if there's something that you go 'Oh god that could fall into a hole. I'll deal with that next week', it's better not to deal with it next week, it's better, especially with conflict around people, to go 'how are you feeling? what's going on? The sooner you deal with those things the more efficient the team is, and the healthier the team is.

Q: If you bring in people from other groups from outside (like the collaboration with the Korean dancers) does that have an impact on the way the rest of the team works?

D: It has a huge impact because you are not only talking about another team you are talking about a cross-cultural collaboration. I've done a number of cross-cultural collaborations, a huge amount internationally. Often our works have toured to non-English speaking countries. I like to think I am not an imperialist or a colonialist. Every culture has its weaknesses and strengths as Australia does, as do Western styles of thought. I try to be as inclusive as possible and as pluralistic as possible without leading to a cacophony, if you know what I mean. Often when people ask to collaborate with us internationally, they have things they want to learn from us and the question for us is, what are we learning from them? That can be a slightly grey area at times but there is always a cultural learning that is a reciprocal process.

Q: Does what other people say or what they do, impact on the way you think about it?

D: It has to. Theatre is a practice and it's practical. You deal with the skills that people have. You can train people up, you can learn from people, you can accept what they have to offer but, at the end of the day, you deal with the skillset that's put in front of you, that's on the floor. And you craft that to the best of your ability to deliver a final aesthetic presentation.

Q: Can you think of situations where a member of the team might shift your way of thinking about something?

D: It happens continually. For instance, say with the piece we are about to do *Pixel Mountain* in Bogota. We made that about five years ago in Korea. Korea is an interesting country... It has a huge glass ceiling for women in particular, a huge income disparity between men and women, high suicide rates- all the normal fracturing you'd expect in a country that has gone from a village mentality to a highly industrialised nation within a generation. I could make all kinds of statements and lectures about that but, in the first instance, I went to the Korean dancers and said, 'what comment would you like to make? What's an aspect of your culture in regard to the disparity that are going on in your society as you perceive them? What would you like to make a scene about?' And they wanted to make a scene about ritualised female suicide which is a very strong topic!

It was of interest to them because there is a tradition in Korea that women cannot have a voice. The only voice they can have when they are dissatisfied in a marriage, or in a work situation, is they ritually commit suicide. They dress up in their bridal outfits and they go and hang themselves in the middle of the living room. It's a shocking and very telling point. So, we made, in part of *Pixel Mountain*, which was a journey of culture from a pastoral way of being to intensely commodified industrialisation and a reflection on that – there is a scene where there is a ritualised suicide. It's a dance work so how much of that is graphically understood by the audience, is a moot point, but the symbolism is there. I never knew about ritualised Korean female suicide, did you? (No). With every piece we make, I personally learn. People say they learn from me; they learn from me artistically but they also learn from me about process and communication and aesthetic. I think that's what I pass on.

Q: If you could cast your mind back, were there particular barriers to bringing in the new type of technologies and to make it acceptable to the team?

D: There were several people who were key to my journey at that stage. My nephew Sam Clarkson was a gaming designer; he was doing very interesting gaming design working with photogrammetry. That was my initial link. I looked at what he was doing and saw the bridges between theatre practice and some of the gaming practice he was doing. I was particularly drawing parallels with masking and the Greek practice of ‘masque’ - creating a mask related to notions of masking the body or masking space. That gave me the beginning of the template for *Encoded*. I then started working with Andrew Johnston. Kate Richards came in and helped me with my dramaturgy towards the integration of digital technology.

We took it very slow. We were fortunate to receive some funding from the Australia Council which allowed my research and development to proceed in stages. I built the palettes up in conjunction with the Andrews. We generated states, we had conversations, we did a lot of research. I think that then gave me the confidence to move into these other works: there has been research and development in each of the works, but particularly that grounding phase- it was a year of solid research. Probably the only ‘technology phobia’ was mine because I’d always been a purist in regards working with the body, but I’d worked with the body for 20 years. Way back I’d studied astrophysics at university and I always did very well at science. So, when I went OK let’s embrace it: it was very immediate for me. There is resistance in the sector around digital technology but on some level, it’s just like working with lighting or sound.

Q: What was the impact of bringing in the technology on your theatre practice?

D: We’d need to talk through the evolution of each show really. *Encoded* was the first work. I’m trying to think about the relationship it had to the preceding work which was *Mirror Mirror*. There are commonalities with each work I make but there’s also progressions with each work. The first work I made with technology had tracking in it, and fluid simulations and live projection and that was fundamentally different from the previous works. My catchall was to not let the pixel dominate the human: the humanity has to be complemented – and really the pixels must support the humanity. I want to use technology to make pertinent comments about the human condition.

Q: Some say the technology is just a tool, other say it’s a new medium, some take it further and say it’s much more of a partner relationship. How does it feel to you using those terms?

D: It has been one of the dominant fields of enquiry. Theatre has many components when you deliver a show. The technology aspects for the last five or six years have been one of the major fields of enquiry. It has been extremely fruitful and rewarding; it has allowed for an increase in aesthetic, a deepening of understanding of the human condition. *Encoded* was really a reflection and in some ways technology...since the industrial revolution technology has been either the blessing or the curse of humanity. How we use that technology to make comment in theatre shows is an interesting question. For many years I stripped back and made comment on the human condition with minimal technology, if you like. Now we are moving into increasingly high-tech worlds, you can use that technology to make social commentary or you can just that technology to be almost invisible but spectacular. Again, show by show it varies.

Q: Is it important to have the development process visible to your performers, you team?

D: Especially at the beginning that feedback loop was extremely important. With *Creature*, there was probably less feedback. In some ways, it was an effect that was running behind them. It had an obvious effect but it was less nuanced and personally crafted than *Encoded* where particularly we were working with Leanne Litton. She spent a lot of time in the studio working with us and giving feedback about what she was perceiving. With the next work we are making, if we manage to pull off the money to create a fully interactive 3D environment, that’s going to be interactivity in a whole new way because it’s going to be in three dimensions in and around the performer. Again, I think there needs to be considerable time figuring out what the impact of that technology is on performers. It will be profound inasmuch as VR is changing the notion of what screen is. I think to create a 3D immersive space that is not VR, but in some way, has the ability to be physicalized, will make a profound difference on staging and what staging is. That needs research and development and no-one has done that yet, I think.

Q: What you are describing relates to the embodied interaction work going on in some places.

D: For ten or twenty years, I studied release-based dance and a lot of those interiorities, physicalized processes and the like, well, I've done a lot of training in that. For me, to a certain extent I expect my dancers to have that as a ground. So, the embodiment practices as relating to technology, in a similar way I'm probably looking at the next step beyond that. But what is challenging- and this is what I mean about consolidating areas of practice- the ability to have solid embodiment practice, to have an integration into technology, to have a strong theatre narrative, to have a seamless storyboard, to work with animaters, to work with aerial systems and technology systems in regards the staging of the work, there's a lot of platforms that you need at least some knowledge of. How you do that, where your research comes from, how you fund that, you quickly get to the pointy end of the stick where there's a hell of a lot going on and the ability to integrate that into a meaningful humanised theatre statement is a big ask! I think the important thing is they need to be good decent people capable of communicating! I always say with my team it is 49% skill, 51% personality.

¹ The Stalker Theatre Company website: www.stalker.com.au